

Chancellor's Notes

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools, and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

November 20, 2009

Early Childhood Education: Steps to Build a City

Recently I observed an early childhood classroom that was working under an inclusion model, in which students with special needs were not in separate classrooms, but instead worked alongside their typically developing peers. Led by their teacher, the children were dancing in a circle in the center of the room. Unselfconscious, joyful and oblivious to my observation, to them it was about having fun. But they were learning kinesthetic and spatial awareness, cooperation, motor coordination, the difference between left and right, melody, rhyming and phonological awareness through song.



One student sat in a wheelchair in the circle, and as the music reached a crescendo, he could barely contain himself in his chair. So he didn't. He wiggled with the music, dance-crawling from his chair into the center of the floor with his peers, who moved aside to accommodate him. I believe that the only ones who noticed his disability in that moment were the two adults in the room: his teacher, and me.

It is difficult to describe the power coursing through a high quality and inclusive early childhood classroom. Yet despite the overwhelming research on the critical role of early childhood education, and the numerous mechanisms at play in learning early literacy and other building-block skills, there is still much misunderstanding about this stage of development and how complex it is.

As many parents discover, after my children were born I was amazed to witness the pace of learning that occurred in their earliest years of development. I marveled at the energy it took on their end to adjust their worldview almost daily with volumes of new information—and on my end in answering what felt like thousands of nuanced questions about the world in an age-appropriate way.

This week the [National Association for the Education of Young Children is hosting its annual conference](#) in Washington, DC, and it is a good time to clear up some of the misunderstandings about early childhood education and the vast skill set it requires of educators.

What is so Important and Interesting About the First Years of School?

The next time you meet a teacher of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or first grade, imagine the responsibility they have for the 20 or so brains they build every day. In an urban district, the job is even more difficult.

- 90% of brain development occurs by the age of five.ⁱ
- Before the age of 7, the brain is essentially wired for learning a language. This is why learning our primary language has to happen during this time, and why learning a second language in the early years is optimal as opposed to waiting for high school.
- Longitudinal studies show that children in low-income families who attend pre-kindergarten programs do better in school in the later years than those who do not attend pre-kindergarten.ⁱⁱ
- Children in low-income families on public assistance hear one-half to one-third as many spoken words as children in more affluent households, so that a child in a low-income home knows about 3,000 words by age 6, while in a high-income family it is closer to 20,000.ⁱⁱⁱ In part, this is because parents in higher-income homes tend to use daily activities more often to promote learning (for example, making a trip to the supermarket a search for letters and colors, asking probing questions for children to expand on their questions and ideas, speaking with their children often, or reading with them and discussing the characters, storylines and the connections to children's lives).^{iv}
- Some obstacles created in early childhood can affect later achievement across all income levels. For example, in affluent, middle-income and low-income households, excessive exposure to television and video may be creating some stumbling blocks for children in the later years. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly advises against children watching TV before the age of 2, citing later problems with attention that may result (Note: Baby Einstein is still TV).

What Happens to a City When Residents Do Not Have Access to Quality Early Childhood Education?



Photo by Meghan Gay

school freshmen going on to graduate from college within 5 years of high school.

A far-reaching web of dysfunction results, and thousands of citizens miss the opportunity to realize their full potential. In 2008 our state education agency released a report showing that approximately 2,000 children in the District lacked access to pre-school education programs, and the quality of pre-k services throughout the District is uneven.^v By the time our African-American students in low-income families are in the 4th grade, they are a full two grade levels behind African-American students from low-income families in New York. By the 8th grade, reading and math proficiency is less than 20% on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, with less than 9% of our high

I believe this is part of the reason that 36% of adult DC residents are functionally illiterate^{vi}, and that Washington, DC is second in the country in the percentage of residents living in poverty. In a school district that is 79% African American, it is not surprising then that the poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and crime rates are highest among an entire minority group that has not been well-served by the school system in the early years.

For these reasons, and with support from President Obama and the DC Council, early childhood education is under radical transformation in the District of Columbia Public Schools. Our new Director of Early Childhood Education, Miriam Calderon*, is leading the effort.

Considering the stark realities that a lack of high quality early childhood education creates, we can invest much hope and confidence in the power of early childhood reforms to extend far into the future and across thousands of lives. A quality early childhood education creates new roots for all grades and the entire school system. Over time, it will feed higher adult literacy and employment rates and can help to close the income gaps between black and white adults.

How is DCPS Improving Early Childhood Education?

Expansion:

Many of our kindergartners already have significant verbal and academic learning gaps, and expanding access to school environments for three- and four-year-olds can help to close it. We are expanding pre-kindergarten classrooms over the next five years to meet the growing need for high quality early education in the city. In 2010 we plan to continue the progress of the previous two years of expansion, adding 15 more pre-school and pre-kindergarten classrooms which will serve an additional 260 students.



Quality:

However, increased access to slots alone will not produce the results we need. Every one of those slots must represent a high quality pre-kindergarten experience.

- **Teacher Professional Development:**

The skills of a high quality early childhood educator are specialized and complex. We are increasing the support to teachers, who are working to hone their craft this year in a number of ways.

After rolling out a new [Teaching and Learning Framework](#) this year for all teachers, we are tailoring it to the needs of early childhood educators. Throughout the year they are meeting with other early childhood educators and collaborating to improve their practice.

Tied to the Teaching and Learning Framework is a [new performance assessment for teachers \(IMPACT\)](#), and after the first assessments we are using the results to identify which areas of practice teachers can hone next in order to move to the next level of performance.

- **Using Data to Drive Instruction:**

The skills learned in early childhood are as complex and fascinating as the skills needed to teach them. In addition to bodily kinesthetic awareness, literacy skills, identity and relationship to others, health and hygiene, and a laundry list of others, even if we were to pick just one of those skills, such as literacy, there are a number of progress points that should be measured during this time (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary). This measurement then must happen for each student, giving teachers the tools they need to address deficiencies and challenge each child to move to a higher level. In order to assist teachers in tracking all of this, in all kindergarten classrooms we are adding easy-to-use assessments (DIBELS) which measures progress in the various components of early literacy.

- **Expanding Access to Head Start:**

Right now 70% of students in our system are eligible for free or reduced price lunch because they are in low-income homes. Yet only 40% of students in our early childhood classrooms receive comprehensive services from Head Start. We know that many more of our families should have access to these services, which include intensive family supports, health and developmental screenings, and nutrition and medical services, all critical to ensuring that our children thrive and learn.

- **Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Education:**

Parents are our most important allies in the effort to ensure that all children begin school and progress through their early years with the skills and words needed to master the content for each grade level. Children need their parents involved in their education long after the early childhood stage, and the work does not end at 5 years old. However, especially considering the dependence of all subject areas on literacy, we are improving our capacity to engage parents in reading with their children in ways that promote literacy, asking questions that build critical thinking skills, and using daily life outside of school to build children's skills.

Identifying and Serving Students at the First Sign of Delay: Early Stages Intervention Center

DCPS has the highest referral rate to special education in the country, with an over-representation of African American children in special education.

DCPS needed an early intervention system to stop this cycle and ensure that all young children with special needs in the District of Columbia are provided with a strong start to school. To this end, in October we opened [Early Stages](#). The center is open to all of DC's children. It identifies and evaluates three to five year-old children whose parents are concerned they may have learning delays, and highly qualified staff recommend the appropriate services for those who show special needs. They also provide hearing and vision screens for all children, and assessments of immunization status, lead status and well-child care status.

If you have a young child you think may be delayed, I hope you will visit the website, www.earlystagesdc.org for more information.

Inclusion

As I witnessed in the inclusive pre-kindergarten classroom, students with special needs and their peers learn best in the least restrictive environments possible. This applies to more than the content area of study, and extends to the social and other skills that lead to professional success later in life. In most cases, the least restrictive environment means that students with varying needs work together in the same classrooms.

Teaching children to accommodate a disability into their lives should occur from the start. Fortunately, young children often do not see the differences that we do, and teaching students in an inclusive environment reflects what children seem to understand already. Instead, for many years students have been segregated early, which I believe is the unfortunate first step to teaching our children that difference is a stigma to be avoided.

Parents: Expect Higher Quality



With all of the resources and research available on early childhood education, there are no good reasons that a child in any neighborhood should receive anything but the best early childhood education. Without sacrificing play or childhood, parents and educators can use the knowledge and resources we have now, to take advantage of the most active neurological phase of development in children's lives. Fortunately, this will make things easier for parents and educators later, as our children successfully navigate their challenges with the confidence and skills borne in their first five years of life.

So an early childhood classroom may look like playtime to adults, and feel like play to children—as it should. But if you have ever tried to teach a child to read, then you won't let appearances fool you. This *is* rocket science. Good early childhood teachers

strategically build a daily practice from research, student performance data on multiple metrics, observation and insight about each student in the classroom, communications with parents, and a keen ability to hone children's social and other skills in a classroom full of active students, each one overflowing with questions that are tough enough to answer coming from one child alone.

They make work and play indistinguishable to children in ways that most adults have forgotten how to do for ourselves, and without them our cities' economies would perish. We would do well to regard them with the respect and rewards that reflect the astonishing value of their work.

* Miriam Calderon

Miriam Calderon is the Director of Early Childhood Education in the Office of Teaching and Learning. She serves as the Administrator for Head Start, preschool, and pre-kindergarten programs serving nearly 4,200 children in 85 elementary schools throughout the city.

Prior to joining DCPS, Ms. Calderon's work focused on federal early childhood education policy. For 5 ½ years she served as Associate Director of Education Policy at the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights organization. She is a social worker by training and began her career in early education working as a mental health consultant in Head Start programs in Portland, Oregon.



She holds a BA in Sociology with a Social Welfare concentration from the University of Delaware and her Masters in Social Work from Portland State University. She has published several reports on early childhood education and her work is cited in both the English and Spanish media. Ms. Calderon is a native of the District and the mother of three year-old twins.

ⁱRAND Corporation

ⁱⁱThe Carolina Abecedarian Project.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study

ⁱⁱⁱAmerica Reads

^{iv}For more on this topic, including the causes and profound effects of the vocabulary gap, readers may be interested in *Meaningful Differences* by Betty Hart and Todd Risley, or *Beginning Literacy with Language*, by David Dickinson

^vDC Office of the State Superintendent of Education

^{vi}State Education Agency, 2007

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